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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002554

SIPDIS

FOR DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE FROM AMBASSADOR GNEHM

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: UNRWA AND U.S. INTERESTS

Classified By: DCM Greg Berry, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a joint message from Embassies Amman, Beirut and Damascus.

12. (C) Given current scrutiny in the Israeli press and in Congress of UNRWA's programs and role in the West Bank, it is important to remember that UNRWA plays a key role throughout the region -- Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza -- in maintaining a basic standard of living (and hence political stability) among an extremely politicized Palestinian refugee population. It is the largest provider of services to Palestinian refugees -- services that local governments would have a hard time funding in UNRWA's absence and, in the case of Lebanon, would refuse in fear that such steps would lead to the refugees' permanent resettlement. With 22,000 mostly Palestinian staff, UNRWA also is a significant employer of a population whose unemployment rate is universally higher than that of the local populace. (The unemployment rate for Palestinians in Lebanon, for example, is estimated at 60 percent.)

13. (C) Perhaps most important, UNRWA is one of the few organizations able to instill Western-based values -- a critical counterweight in an increasingly marginalized population that could easily be politically activated in the event of further regional tensions. It also provides a secular alternative to the Islamic charitable organizations working in the camps, many of which promote unhelpful political agendas and have links to suspect organizations. Continued, strong USG support for UNRWA is essential to our strategic interests in the region. Here are just a few examples of UNRWA's relevance outside the West Bank and Gaza, in places that normally do not make the news.

JORDAN

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14. (SBU) Jordan has more registered Palestinian refugees than the West Bank and Gaza combined (1.6 million in Jordan, 1.4 million in the West Bank and Gaza). With an annual budget in Jordan of USD 71 million, UNRWA provides services to this poor, politically active population that the Government of Jordan could not support without major new international assistance. UNRWA is the secular, apolitical alternative to Islamic charitable organizations -- some with a political agenda. As UNRWA's largest donor, the U.S. has significant influence over UNRWA programs and policies, where it would have none with alternative organizations.

15. (C) GOJ officials have told us that any reduction in US support for UNRWA would have devastating operational and political ramifications in Jordan. With the U.S. providing at least 25 percent of UNRWA's annual operating budget, any reduction in U.S. funding would force UNRWA to cut its services significantly. A reduction in U.S. funding for UNRWA also would be a blow to peace in the region, as UNRWA always has been viewed as a symbol of hope that the Palestinians have not been forgotten. Palestinian refugees in Jordan would interpret funding cuts as a sign that UNRWA was being phased out and their internationally recognized claims eliminated without a political settlement. We agree with Jordanian officials who believe that this would be yet another challenge to the long-term stability of the Kingdom.

LEBANON

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16. (SBU) UNRWA records indicate that 375,000 registered Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon, yet most UNRWA officials agree that the number is closer to 200,000. (Given the difficult conditions in Lebanon, most refugees who have been able to leave have left.) The 200,000 refugees in Lebanon constitute the neediest of UNRWA's lot, excluded by Lebanese law from working in 72 different professions, owning property or even improving the infrastructure in the camps. With neither national ID's nor significant income, the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are far more dependent on UNRWA services than those in any other area. UNRWA's USD 48 million annual budget in Lebanon covers health and education services that are not provided in other UNRWA fields, such as extended hospitalization payments and secondary education.

17. (SBU) Given Lebanon's fragile political balance, stability among the historically activist Palestinian refugee community is essential. UNRWA is the largest provider of services to Palestinian refugees, and one of the few truly apolitical organizations working in the camps.

SYRIA  
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18. (SBU) With an annual operating budget of USD 26 million, UNRWA's Syria Field provides education, health and relief services to the 400,000 Palestinian refugees resident in Syria. As in Jordan, UNRWA's innovative social programs allow the U.S., as a major UNRWA donor, to shape programs and policies.

19. (C) Thanks to UNRWA, Syria is playing the unexpected role of incubator for the potential resettlement of Palestinian refugees within Arab countries. With significant support from the USG, UNRWA's Syria field has developed plans to resettle 300 refugee families from overcrowded World War II barracks to a newly developed camp. With backing from the European Commission, UNRWA and the SARG also are building massive new water and sewerage links from its rural refugee camps to neighboring Syrian towns. While insisting that its own significant political and financial support for these projects in no way diminishes the refugees' right of return, the Syrian Government is in fact quietly laying the groundwork for smooth absorption of Palestinian refugees into Syrian society, should a political settlement be reached. It serves U.S. interests to encourage this unannounced SARG policy by continuing our support for UNRWA's operations in Syria.

110. (C) Our cooperation with UNRWA also puts us in touch with the Syrian agency in charge of Palestinian refugees, GAPAR. Embassy Damascus and Amman-based refcoord have very good relations with GAPAR. Like anti-narcotics and culture, assistance to Palestinian refugees is one of the areas where we have a cooperative, mutually beneficial relationship with the SARG, despite the tensions in the overall bilateral relationship.

Gnehm